

**COST Action CA17114**

Transdisciplinary solutions to  
cross sectoral disadvantage  
in youth (YOUNG-IN)

**WG5**



**Working paper series**

# **Youth-oriented policies beyond ideal-typical welfare regimes in Europe:**

## **Situation and initiatives from the perspective of youth transition regimes**

### **Bulgaria**

**Veneta Krasteva, [vkasteva@bas.bg](mailto:vkasteva@bas.bg)**

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

---

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA17114, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation.

[www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu)



COST is supported by the Horizon 2020  
Framework Programme of the European Union

---

This WP series contributes to the main aims of YOUNG-IN and WG5 (Knowledge-based social investment policy for youth) by aiming to:

- 1) Describe today's situation of youth in our nine case countries based on characteristics perceived to be the most relevant by the literature of Youth Transition Regimes (YTR);
- 2) Give an overview of the main policy initiatives targeted at youth within key policy areas relevant for YTR.

This WP is structured as follows: Part I gives a harmonised comparative overview of the existing situation in the analysed nine countries in comparison with EU28 (the analyses cover period before Brexit, thus kept EU28 instead of EU27). Part II consists of nine chapters about youth-oriented policy initiatives in those countries in two recent decades across policy areas especially relevant for youth (education, labour market, social inclusion, participation and housing). Part III concludes with an executive summary that compares the countries' youth-oriented policy directions in the modified framework of YTR.

The structure and authorship of respective chapters are as follows (current chapter highlighted):

- ▶ Part I: A comparative introduction of situation of youth, Triin Lauri
- ▶ Part II: Country reports on youth oriented policies:
  - **Youth-oriented policies in Bulgaria (BG), Veneta Krasteva**
  - Youth-oriented policies in Switzerland (CH), Berihun Wagaw, Matthias Drilling, Semhar Negash
  - Youth-oriented policies in Estonia (EE), Anu Toots and Triin Lauri
  - Youth-oriented policies in Spain (ES), Francisco Javier Moreno-Fuentes, Pau Marí-Klose
  - Youth-oriented policies in Lithuania (LT), Daiva Skučienė, Natalija Mažeikienė
  - Youth-oriented policies in Latvia (LV), Anna Broka
  - Youth-oriented policies in Moldova (MD), Crismaru Mariana
  - Youth-oriented policies in Malta (MT), Sue Vella
  - Youth-oriented policies in Turkey (TR), Hande Barlin, Nilufer Korkmaz Yaylagul
- ▶ Conclusion, Anu Toots, Triin Lauri

WP series is edited by Triin Lauri, Anu Toots, Tom Chevalier and Matthias Drilling.

Language and technical editing: Tiia Falk and Luisa Translation Agency.

#### **To cite this WP Series:**

Lauri, T.; Toots, A.; Chevalier, T.; & Drilling, M. (Eds.) (2021). Youth-oriented policies beyond ideal-typical welfare regimes in Europe: Situation and initiatives from the perspective of youth transition regimes. Young-In WP Series (Cost Action Publications), Tallinn. <https://young-in.eu/publications/> (whole series)

Krasteva, V. (2021). Part II: Youth-oriented policies in Bulgaria (BG): In: Lauri, T.; Toots, A.; Chevalier, T.; Drilling, M. (Ed.). Youth-oriented policies beyond ideal-typical welfare regimes in Europe: Situation and initiatives from the perspective of youth transition regimes. Young-In WP Series (Cost Action Publications), Tallinn. <https://young-in.eu/publications/> (particular chapter from series)

## Brief information on country

**Bulgaria** is located on the Balkan Peninsula and shares borders with Romania to the north, Serbia and North Macedonia to the west, Greece to the south and Turkey to the southeast. This location makes it the external boundary of the EU. Bulgaria is a member of the EU since 2007 and of NATO since 2004. Its population has decreased progressively from 8,191,000 in the year 2000 to 6,951,482 in 2019 (National Statistical Institute, 2020). Bulgaria is one of the top ten countries in the world by aging population (United Nations, 2019). The share of young people (aged 15-29) is 14.9 % and people over 65 make up 21.3 % of the population. Along with the aging of the population, the migration trend is continuing both within the country, resulting in the depopulation of small settlements, and towards foreign countries. The main minority groups in the country are the Turks (about 9% of the population) and the Roma (about 5%). Since the beginning of the 1990s, Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic. From 1944 to 1989, the country was under a Communist regime. After the fall of the regime, a change from totalitarian to democratic governance began, as well as a transition from a planned to a market economy. Judging by the HDI published in 2018, the country held the unenviable 52nd place out of 62 countries in the world by human development.

## Part II. Main youth related initiatives in key policy areas

In 2010, the Council of Ministers adopted the National Youth Strategy (2010-2020), used to pursue the main goals of youth policy in Bulgaria.

### 2.1. Education policy beyond the lower secondary level

The Pre-school and School Education Act, passed by the Parliament in September 2015, is the main document providing a conceptual and legal framework for reforms in school education. Since then it has undergone several amendments. The Pre-school and School Education Act introduces greater flexibility, grants freedom to school programmes, regulates various forms of training (distance, combined training), and envisages centres for personal development and forms of individualised assistance to schoolchildren. Special attention is paid to the need for better links between education and the labour market.

#### 2.1.1. Policies against school drop-out, low achievement & NEET

The high number of dropouts from the education system is a problem identified at the national level. The issue is included in the Strategy for decreasing the share of early leavers from the education system (2013–2020) and the Strategy for the educational integration of children and schoolchildren from the ethnic minorities (2015-2020). The document is entirely in harmony with the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union (2011/C 191/01 of 28.06.2011) and with the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training.

The Youth Act introduced the concept of "youth worker", whose function is to engage and promote compensation policies for persons aged 15 to 29, including the provision of integrated services for youths at risk of dropping out, as well as those who have already dropped out from the education system. Free and updated textbooks are provided for schoolchildren up to the 7th grade and for children in the preparatory groups, and free lunch is provided. In 2012, the national programme "School without Absences" was introduced, providing additional resources for schools. The national programme "Care for Every Student" ensures training in Bulgarian for those who have difficulties with the language. Under the national program "Qualification", teachers, directors, psychologists are trained to identify children at risk of dropping out of school. The projects "Creating a Favourable Multicultural Environment for Application in Practice of Intercultural Education", "Integration of Children and Schoolchildren from Ethnic Minorities in the Education System", "Reintegration of Dropouts from the Education System" and "Educational Integration of Children and Schoolchildren from Ethnic Minorities" are all programs that promote integration, aim to decrease the number of those prematurely leaving school and increase the inclusion of children from the ethnic minorities not included in the education system. Various forms of training are applied: independent, individual, night school, extramural. Programs for acquiring key competencies are designed and applied.

### **2.1.2. Access to different tracks and levels**

In Bulgaria, formal education is obligatory up to the age of 16. Basic and secondary education are free in state and municipal schools. Some of the measures implemented to ensure access to education for all children and students of the mandatory school age are: free transport, full-time arrangement of the school day, the provision of meals for children travelling from other communities, and the provision of free textbooks for all students until 7th grade (National Report, 2014, p. 18).

School-based VET is provided only at a secondary level. Post-secondary, non-tertiary vocational qualifications (ISCED 2011 level 4, EQF level 5) can be acquired only by people with completed secondary education. The acquired qualification at this level provides access to the labour market. Secondary VET learners may receive grants offered on a monthly basis between 5% and 15% of the national minimum wage (Cedefop). Learners in dual VET receive monthly remuneration from the companies they are trained in based on their contract. All secondary VET learners are entitled to receive discounts when using public transport, including trains and urban public transport. The discount can be up to 60% and is decided by each municipality. According to the VET Act, the provision of training is free of value added tax for companies. The Employment Promotion Act foresees financial benefits for employers for creating training positions (jobs) for the unemployed.

Public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) are allowed to define their own fees. However, in the case of public institutions, maximum amounts are set by the government. Student tuition fees strongly depend on the program and field of study. First cycle fees in state universities for full-time studies range from BGN 300 to BGN 1 500 per year and for parttime studies from BGN 150 to BGN 1 100. Annual second cycle full-time study fees range

from BGN 500 to BGN 1 500, and for part-time studies from BGN 370 to BGN 580. Certain categories of students are exempt from paying fees: orphans, persons with disabilities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, p. 27).

Based on the idea of better adapting education to the requirements of business, priority specialties in HEIs (in nearly all engineering and technical professional fields) that are in demand on the labour market are defined. For other specialties besides the priority ones, the number of allotted places for which the state assumes part of the funding are reduced. These include, for example, the specialties related to the social, economic and legal sciences. Thus, during the academic year 2019/2020, there were 2700 fewer state-funded places for students than in 2018. Compared to 2015, when state-funded enrolment involved 58,000 students, today it covers 43,000 (Ministry of Education and Science, 2019).

### **2.1.3. Policies on educational quality**

Bulgaria is in last place among EU countries by the general score of students on the international PISA test (OECD, 2019 data for 2018). The poor results, according to the Minister of Education, are due to the difficulties of the Bulgarian educational system in converting knowledge into skills.

After 2015, changes in the school programmes were introduced at all levels. Aiming to bring the school material up to date, they introduced new subjects such as Civic Education, Computer Modelling, etc. It is envisaged that for 40 professional areas the school programs and school plan will be renewed with the aid of business representatives regularly every five years, or when necessary.

An important element of the measures foreseen for improving the quality of school education is raising teachers' salaries in order to enhance their motivation and attract young teachers. In pursuing this objective, the salaries of teachers in the system of preschool and school education doubled in the period from 2012 to 2019. Since January 1, 2019, the starting salary for teachers increased from 760 to 920 BGN (the average salary in the country is BGN 1260).

Regarding higher education, the main debated issues have been: the quality of education and the relevance of education to the labour market. In 2011, performance-based funding, in which the allocation of financial resources to state universities is linked to their actual performance, partly measured by labour market integration of graduates, was introduced.

### **2.1.4. Social support to learners**

Stipends (monthly and one-off) are granted to schoolchildren after the completion of basic education. They can be granted: for excellent grades; to schoolchildren without parents or with a single parent; to children with special educational needs; or may consist of social stipends for school children with low income.

For students in universities, grants/scholarships are available to full-time students in all study cycles. They are distributed by higher education institutions based on their specific



eligibility criteria. One type of grant must contain two indicators: academic performance and monthly income per family member of the student for the previous six months. From 2016, universities must also award merit-based grants – based only on academic performance. Grant amounts range from BGN 70 to 150 per month, and in most cases are issued for 10 months. There is no support for part-time students. In 2016/17, 12.2 % of full-time students received grants. Full-time first and second cycle students who are EU/EEA/Swiss citizens, less than 35 years old and have not interrupted their studies can apply for state guaranteed loans. The study loan may be equal to the tuition fee. The amount of loan to cover living costs is linked to the minimum wage (BGN 610 since 01.01.2020). The interest rate cannot exceed 7 % at banks that have signed an agreement with the government. Repayment is due one year after graduation and must be completed in 10 years (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, p. 27).

In accordance with the Statutes for Application of the Employment Promotion Act, the authorities may grant scholarships, cover transportation and accommodation costs for people undergoing training in literacy, in professional qualification and key competencies, the state may cover the interests on the loans of disabled people, may cover the costs of psychological assistance and guidance for appropriate programs and measures for employment and training.

Following Busemeyer (2015), it can be summed up that the Bulgarian education system is characterised by a combination of high levels of educational stratification and high levels of de-commodification (most of the schools are funded by the municipal or state budget). According to researchers (Gortazar et al., 2014; Boyadjieva, & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2019) social stratification in Bulgarian schools is the highest among EU countries. The socio-economic status of the family and the place of residence are the main lines of division among the young people in regard to the access to quality education, which leads to increasing inequality among youths.

Young Bulgarians are dropping out of the educational system mainly as a result of poverty and social exclusion. In order to decrease the number of drop-outs, over the last few years specific measures have been introduced: material support of parents (at the beginning of the school year); free transport to the school (if it is in another town), full-time arrangement of the school day with provided meals, free breakfast for pupils in basic education, and free textbooks until 7th grade.

In the last five years, many changes in the school programs at all levels were introduced in order to improve the quality of education. In addition, special attention was paid to attracting young teachers, mainly through raising teachers' salaries. However, the poor performance on PISA tests and on the nation-wide assessment shows that there are still problems to be solved.

A significant change in the Bulgarian educational system is the general trend of moving towards better adaptation to the requirements of business and labour market demands. One of the main aims in the newly accepted Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the 2021-2030 period is the binding of the admission in universities

with the needs of the labour market. The problem is that in Bulgarian society an instrumental approach towards education was imposed. According to this approach, education is seen just as a tool for the formation of qualified workers, i.e. it is transformed into a tool servicing only the labour market.

**Table 1: Mapping education policy initiatives in Bulgaria**

Issue in education	Main instruments to address it	Direction
High number of dropouts and children not included in education (especially from Roma minority)	Material support of parents; free transport, full-time arrangement of the school day, provision of meals, free breakfast	Compensatory enhancement
Restricted access to quality education, increasing inequalities	Not addressed	High stratification
Poor quality of school education	Changes in the school programmes; raising teachers' salaries	Employability skills
Low link between education and labour market	Introducing dual VET; financial benefits for employers; priority specialties in HEIs; performance-based funding for HEIs	High stratification

  

Education	Low stratification	High stratification
High commodification		
Low commodification		X

## 2.2. Labour market policy for youth

Youths in Bulgaria are among the latest to enter the labour market, compared with other EU states (National Youth Strategy 2010-2020, 2010, p. 11). The National Youth Strategy takes into account that in most cases youths have no practical or work experience in the field of their obtained specialty after completing their education, and therefore find it hard to enter the labour market.

The trends in the labour market policies are: universal shift from passive to active policies; strong employability focus; predominantly addressing individual deficits and lacking attention to structural ones; high preference of reactive and neglect of preventive measures; focus on any jobs instead of good jobs. The 'good job' concept is not incorporated in any meaningful way.

### 2.2.1. Unemployment protection (PLMP)

Due to the requirement of a minimum length of professional experience, the greater part of young people leaving education are excluded from the possibility of receiving unemployment benefits. Young unemployed persons may register at the employment service directorates of the Employment Agency, where they receive information about available job vacancies. In addition, the average unemployment benefit is too close to the poverty line and minimum wage for the country. Since 2011 the average unemployment benefit has not changed much. The low amount of the unemployment benefit is a result mainly of the fact that many employees receive low salaries.

### 2.2.2. Active labour market policy (ALMP)

In 2002 and 2003, a number of programmes were launched for including vulnerable groups in the labour market. The total number of labour market interventions in Bulgaria in 2015 was 112, of which 107 were services and measures (categories 1-7) and 5 were supports (categories 8-9) (Eurostat, 2015).

A change in labour market policies was brought about after 2014, with the introduction of the European Youth Guarantee. The new initiatives were aimed at young people as a specific vulnerable group. The funding of measures implementing the Youth Guarantee comes from the state budget as well as the European Social Fund, in accordance with the Youth Employment Initiative. The Youth Guarantee envisages for all young people aged 15 to 24 to be provided either good job offers, continued education, apprenticeship or internship within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving the system of formal education. In Bulgaria, the age range of targeted youths is extended to 29 years. Compared to most European countries, other features specific to Bulgaria in the action of the Youth Guarantee are that the first stage gives priority to youths who are long-term unemployed or have been registered for long periods with the Labour Offices, ahead of youths registered for up to four months. In addition Sofia City (the district in which the capital city is located) is considered as separate from the South-western region (Yordanova, 2020).

Despite the priorities defined by the strategies, practical experience has shown that it is difficult for ALMPs to precisely target youths with low education levels (European Commission, 2016). Only 12% of NEETs aged 15-24 were enrolled in the Youth Guarantee at any point during 2016, a decrease from 2014. Only 40.5% of those leaving the scheme took up a job offer within four months (European Commission, 2018, p. 33). The number of registered unemployed young people is also low.

### 2.2.3. Industrial and other labour relations

The Labour Code regulates mutual relations between worker and employee. It defines two basic kinds of employment contracts – fixed-term contracts and permanent contracts. The permanent ones are for an indeterminate period of time, while the fixed-term contracts are



for a period of three years. Both kinds of contracts guarantee the same rights for workers, who are insured against the whole range of social risks.

In the last few years, a number of legal amendments were undertaken in Bulgaria, aimed at liberalising contract relations between the employer and the employed in view of increasing flexibility of work. The changes are reflected in the Updated employment strategy adopted in 2013. In 2011, the possibility was introduced to conclude labour contracts for work only on certain days of the month. In 2015, the signing of labour contracts was introduced for seasonal agricultural work, where the shortest term is one day. Youths up to the age of 29 who have completed their education and have no work experience are given the option of employment contracts including internship as a condition. Internship contracts are a specific type of temporary work contract included in the Labour Code in 2014. The duration of these contracts is between 6 and 12 months. All young people who work under these contracts have a tutor who is a specialist in the respective field (Labour Code, article 233b). The interns receive a salary that cannot be lower than the minimum wage. Their tutors also receive payment.

The Employment Promotion Act serves to promote employment, professional training and orientation. The law contains a separate section concerning the stimulation of youth employment. Employers who hire unemployed persons below the age of 29 within the programmes for subsidised employment are provided resources to cover those workers' salaries for a period of 18 months. The hired youths have the same labour and insurance rights as the rest of the workers. Salaries under subsidised employment must be at least the amount of the minimum insurable earnings for the respective economic activity. The minimum salary is fixed by the Council of Ministers. Since January 2020, the minimum salary is BGN 610.

The regulation of work hours provides considerable freedom for employers to make changes as the need arises; part-time work is also a possibility. The option has been added that employment contracts for work from home and for distance work may be conducted. After consultations with the syndicates, the employer may set reduced work hours. The standard work hours per week are 40, but it is possible to increase the work by two hours a day up to 48 hours per week, while part-time work hours may be reduced to one hour per day and cannot exceed 40 hours per week.

Taxation certainly also has an impact on the situation of young people in Bulgaria. The most important change in the taxation system in the country occurred in 2008 with the adoption of the so-called flat tax, where all persons are taxed at an equal rate of 10%. There is no untaxed minimum, which means that although equal in rate for those with high and low income, the tax burden is different for the different income groups, and unfavourable for the latter.

In sum, the access of young people to unemployment benefits is limited. Reforms in the labour market policy expanded the initiatives for subsidised employment and the activation approach. ALMP's focus was placed on individual shortcomings and employability and the assumption that workers would take any job. Unemployed young people are regarded as solely responsible for their situation, which shifts the attention away from the institutional

framework and the socio-economic conditions in the country. In conditions like low wages, low job quality, and high levels of job mismatch, many young people prefer to look for work abroad.

Although the implementation of Youth Guarantee brought increased funding for programmes aimed at both direct job creation and training, there is serious criticism due to the limited impact on more vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of young people with low or no qualifications and education.

**Table 2: Mapping youth oriented labour market policy initiatives in Bulgaria**

Issue in the labour market	Main instruments to address it	Direction
Limited access to unemployment benefits	Not addressed (requirement of a minimum length of professional experience)	Shift from passive to active policies; workfare
NEETs and youths with low education levels	Youth Guarantee; variety of measures	Compensatory
Any jobs instead of good jobs	Programmes for subsidised employment	Activation and employability focus
Low wages, low job quality; job mismatch	Increasing flexibility in work; Internship contracts	Addressing individual deficits and lack of attention to structural ones

  

Labour Market	Compensatory	Preventive
Structure-related		
Individualising	X	

## 2.3. Social welfare policy

### 2.3.1. Access and eligibility to social assistance

Changes made in last few years to the conditions of receiving unemployment benefits and increasing binding rules to participate in LM policies as a condition for receiving social assistance benefits lead to disadvantages for young people. With the amendments made to the Social Assistance Act of 2003, the provision of monthly social assistance became tied to performing community service work. Since 2008, that rule was extended – registration in the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency must last at least 6 months before becoming eligible for social assistance, and the applicant must not have refused offers of work or inclusion in different courses like literacy training, acquiring professional qualifications or key competencies. The recipients of monthly social benefits are included in local authorities' programs that provide community services – they work 4 hours a day for a period of 14 days.

If the recipient of monthly social assistance refuses an offer of paid work, his/her assistance is suspended for two months, and in case of repeated refusal, for a period of two years.

### 2.3.2. Access and eligibility to social services

One social assistance program is Targeted Heating Allowance. This targeted social assistance is granted for a period of five months, from 1 November to 31 March. This allowance is eligible for persons and families whose average monthly income for six months previous to the month when the request application is submitted was less than the differentiated minimum income for heating, and who meet certain criteria.

Persons with long-term disabilities are entitled to the right to remunerated work regardless of whether they receive a pension. They also benefit from a number of exemptions and preferences in accordance with other normative acts: financial assistance for public transport services, for municipal housing rent, for training, etc.

To sum up, the trend of reducing social protection while shifting the focus to an activation approach results in the limited access of young people to social assistance. The impact of social transfers on poverty reduction of young people in Bulgaria is low and insufficient. Following Chevalier's idea of the social citizenship of young people, we can say that in Bulgaria there is a mixture of elements both from the familialisation and individualisation approaches. Before the age of majority, young people are considered to be dependent on the family. Family benefits are provided to the parents (if the family income is under the threshold) until the age of majority of the child, i.e. 18 years. The family tax relief is also restricted to this age. After that age, the young persons are considered independent individuals who can claim social rights directly (this applies even to young people with disabilities who need everyday care). However, parents have the duty to provide support (in case they can give it without much difficulty) for children after reaching the age of majority if children study full-time in secondary (but no more than 20 years of age) and higher education institutions (up to 25 years of age). In addition, there is a cultural norm in the Bulgarian society for parental care for the children to resume "as long as they can" (Mitev & Kovacheva, 2014, p. 82). The family policy does not provide support for students. Young people can apply for grants and loans that do not depend on parental income. However, a student is not eligible to a room in a student dormitory if his/her parents possess a house/flat in the same city.

**Table 3: Mapping youth oriented social policy initiatives in Bulgaria**

Issue in the social sphere	Main instruments to address it	Direction
High share of young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion	Shift from social benefits to employment	Activating inactive people
Low coverage because strict eligibility	Binding benefits assistance with obligation to work or inclusion in training	Young people are considered independent individuals

Social Welfare	
Individualised	Some elements
Familialised	X

## 2.4. Housing policy

### 2.4.1. Access to public housing

Access to public rental housing is limited, and the number of people who benefit from this opportunity is low. There is a targeted assistance for payment of rent in municipal housing. Users of this benefit are persons whose income for the previous month was up to 1.5 times of the differentiated minimum income (BGN 75 monthly), providing they are also lone elderly people over the age of 70; orphans below the age of 25, who have completed training at a social professional learning centre; or single parents.

### 2.4.2. Access to and affordability of commercial housing

Young families can apply for tax concessions in the form of a deduction from the sum of their annual tax base of interest payments made during the year on housing mortgage. Families with children may benefit from tax concessions: deductions are made from the sum of the parents' annual tax base depending on the number of children.

In sum, in Bulgaria the share of home ownership is high. However, the opportunities of young people to buy or rent a house are limited mainly because of their low income coupled with high real estate prices. This is one of the main reasons why Bulgarian youths live with their parents longer compared to their peers in other EU countries. Housing policy expenditure is very low and it is targeted only at the most vulnerable and poor people.

**Table 4: Mapping youth oriented housing policy initiatives in Bulgaria**

Issue in housing	Main instruments to address it	Direction
High share of young people living with parents	Tax concessions for young families	High commodification
Very low expenditure on housing policy	Focus mainly on at-risk groups	Selective access

  

Housing	Universal access	Selective/targeted access
High commodification		X
Low commodification		

## 2.5. Health policy

### 2.5.1. Access to public health care

Access to public health care is related to the paid social insurance. If young people are unemployed and do not qualify for unemployment benefits or monthly social assistance benefits, they have to pay their insurance on their own. This puts them at risk of losing their health insurance rights and not receiving hospital treatment funded by the state. The state pays the health insurance contributions for children (i.e. up to 18 years), regular students, youths in specialised institutions, and recipients of monthly social benefits or targeted heating allowances. Others, however, have an obligation to pay their health insurance contributions themselves (BGN 24.40 monthly). If they fail to do so within three months of the past 36 months, health insurance rights are lost until they do not pay all due contributions for the period of the last 60 months.

### 2.5.2. Public health and awareness raising

According to Eurostat data (Eurostat 2020, data for 2014), 4.3% of youths in Bulgaria (aged 15-29) consume alcohol daily. Bulgaria neither has a national strategy for restricting alcohol consumption among youths, nor is there a national program for health education in school.

In 2012, through amendments in the Health Act, a prohibition was introduced for smoking in closed public spaces and certain open public spaces (sidewalks next to crèches, kindergartens, schools, school dormitories, and places providing social services for children).

To summarise, due to the fact that unemployed young people do not pay health insurance mainly because of lack of income, many of them have restricted access to free medical services. This leads to worsening prevention of health problems and irreparably damages the health of people, especially the health and lives of children.

**Table 5: Mapping youth oriented health policy initiatives in Bulgaria**

Issue in housing	Main instruments to address it	Direction
Restricted access to free medical services	State pays the health insurance contributions for children, regular students, youths in specialised institutions and recipients of monthly social benefits	Shift from budgetary funding to health insurance
Problematic health behaviour among youth (alcohol consumption & smoking)	Prohibition of smoking in closed public spaces and certain open public spaces	Lack of national strategy for restricting alcohol consumption among youths

Health	High (universal) access	Low (status-related; i.e. student, employee) access
High commodification		X
Low commodification		

## 2.6. Active citizenship

### 2.6.1. Regulations of youth involvement in decision making

The National Youth Strategy (2010-2020), among its other goals, envisages the creation of favourable conditions for youth involvement in public and economic life, their engagement in governance at local, district and national levels. In the Youth Act, adopted in 2012 (in effect since 2013), one of the emphases is on the interaction with youths and their involvement in the formulation of policies and decision making relevant to young people. The conditions for the functioning of youth councils are also elaborated in the Act.

### 2.6.2. Programs for advancing youth citizenship and political participation

At present, many municipalities have designed, adopted and are implementing municipal strategies and plans for young people at the local level, in the respective municipality. Nevertheless, the data on Bulgarian youths (Mitev et al., 2019, p. 27) shows they have a rather sceptical attitude towards political activity and participation in civic activities.

In sum, young Bulgarians have low trust in state institutions and politicians. They do not believe that their voice can be heard and this reduces their activity. The poverty and growing inequalities have as a consequence the mass perception of a lack of justice and equal opportunities among large groups of young Bulgarians.

**Table 6: Mapping active citizenship initiatives in Bulgaria**

Issue in housing	Main instruments to address it	Direction
Low political activity and participation in civic activities	Implementing National Youth Strategy and municipal strategies for inclusion of young people at local level government; youth councils	Creation of favourable conditions for youth involvement in public and economic life, their engagement in governance at local, district and national levels

  

Active Citizenship	
High involvement	
Low involvement	X



## Conclusion

In assessing national policies aimed at young people's transitions in Bulgaria, it can be claimed that approaches which are individualised and compensatory predominate (in terms of Pohl & Walther 2007). There is a strong focus on employability, a tendency to predominantly address individual deficits, and a lack of attention to structural ones in all public spheres. The risks are pushed to the level of the individual and are assumed by the family and informal circles. The latter prove to have an important cushioning effect but also determine the possibilities youths will or will not have to enter and remain in the labour market. These factors have a significant effect on the quality of transitions to adulthood. Policies may model the effects of various insufficiencies and obstacles related to the family environment and the differences between the economic possibilities of individuals.

The changes carried out in recent decades in Bulgarian public policies that address employment, social assistance, healthcare, and taxation have resulted in the spread of inequalities and an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion (Stoilova & Krasteva, 2019; Jeliaskova et al., 2018). Overall, a significant factor impacting on the effectiveness of youth policies is the unfavourable context in terms of the low rate of economic growth, the distribution of income, and the tax and social insurance weight, which negatively affect the low and lowest strata of society, but are favourable for the upper strata. In this context, as Tashe and Niessham (2011) point out, the implementation of such policies in low performance economies seems somehow paradoxical and contributes to the perpetuation of poverty.

Despite some positive reforms and initiatives, the educational and training institutions have not succeeded in combating problems such as the insufficient relevance of education to labour market needs, early school leaving, and high rates of NEETs. Youth employment interventions are not able to compensate weaknesses in the early stages of human capital formation and the lack of adequate social investments in the field. Similarly to educational policies, the social policy is weak, inadequate and reinforces the established high inequalities instead of alleviating them (Jeliaskova et al., 2018). The reforms in the health system led to restriction of the access to free medical services of many young people, especially those unemployed and living in poverty. In Bulgaria, public policies to support the housing autonomy of young people are very underdeveloped and do not play a significant role in regard to the situation of young Bulgarians.

The situation of young people in Bulgaria is closer to the Chevalier's concept of familialised citizenship (2016). Having in mind the features of the concept of social investment (Lauri & Toots, 2015), it may be said that certain elements of this concept are to be found in labour market policies. Nevertheless, the principles of the neoliberal paradigm remain predominant in the reforms applied to these spheres. Another problem is that despite the declared awareness in public documents of the multidimensional quality of the youth situation problem and the need for a cross-sectoral youth policy, the applied measures and undertaken reforms in different spheres are often inconsistent, leading to contradictory effects and driving poverty and inequalities. The result is a growing fragmentation of young people in Bulgaria, linked to their parents' lack of opportunities to realise and ensure access to basic life needs (food, a home, heating, etc.), to education, healthcare and the labour market.

## List of References

- Boyadjieva, P., & Ilieva-Trichkova, P. (2019). Horizontal Differentiation Matters: Moderating Influence of the Type of Upper Secondary Education on Students' Transitions. *European Education*, 51(1), pp. 32-50.
- Busemayer, M. (2015). *Skills and Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Employment Promotion Act, amended SG, № 21/13.03.2020. <https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/12262909> (in Bulgarian).
- European Commission. (2016). Country Report Bulgaria 2016: Including an In-Depth Review on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/cr2016\\_bulgaria\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/cr2016_bulgaria_en.pdf).
- European Commission. (2018). *2018 European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011, Country report Bulgaria*, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2018-european-semester-country-report-bulgaria-en.pdf>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2017). *National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education – 2017/18*. Eurydice Facts and Figures. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Eurostat. (2015). Labour Market Policy Statistics. Qualitative Report.
- Eurostat. (2020). Frequency of alcohol consumption by sex, age and country of birth, (code: hlth\_ehis\_a11b).
- Gortazar, L., Herrera-Sosa, K., Kutner, D., Moreno, M., & Gautam, A. (2014). How can Bulgaria improve its education system?: an analysis of PISA 2012 and past results. World Bank, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2012/09/20278281/can-bulgaria-improve-education-system-analysis-pisa-2012-past-results>.
- Jeliazkova, M., Minev, D., Draganov, D., Krasteva, V. & Stoilov, A. (2018). *Youth employment policies in Bulgaria*. Tallinn University.
- Labour Code, amended SG, № 109/22.12.2020. <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/1594373121> (in Bulgarian).
- Lauri, T. & Toots, A. (2015). *Paradigmatic shift in welfare state theory and policy responses: Does Estonia fit in?* Estonian Cooperation Assembly.
- Mitev, P.E. & Kovacheva, S. (2014). *Young people in European Bulgaria. A sociological portrait*. Sofia: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
- Mitev, P.-E., Popivanov, B., Kovacheva, S. & Simeonov, P. (2019). *Youth study-Bulgaria 2018/2019*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Ministry of Education and Science. (2019). *Admission of students 2019/2020-Newsletter*. <https://www.mon.bg/> (in Bulgarian).

National Report. (2014). Republic of Bulgaria's contribution to the Joint 2015 Report of the Council and the European Commission in regards to implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation Education and Training 2020.

National Statistical Institute. (2020). Population and demographic processes-2019. NSI. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6704/population-districts-municipalities-place-residence-and-sex>.

National Youth Strategy 2010-2020. (2010), <http://mpes.government.bg/Pages/Documents/Strategies/default.aspx> (in Bulgarian).

OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*. PISA, OECD Publishing, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b25efab8-en>.

Pohl, A. & Walther, A. (2007). Activating the disadvantaged. Variations in addressing youth transitions across Europe. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26(5), pp. 533-553.

Stoilova, R. & Krasteva, V. (2019). The Bulgarian Welfare System: Reforms and Their Effects on Inequalities and Vulnerable Groups (1997-2018). In: Blum, S., Kuhlmann, J. & Schubert, K. (Eds.). *Handbook of European Welfare Systems*, 2nd edition. Routledge.

Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the 2021-2030 period. <http://strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=5238> (in Bulgarian).

Tache, I. & Neesham, C. (2011). The performance of welfare systems in post-communist Europe: The cases of Romania and Bulgaria. *International Journal of Economic Research*, 2(5), pp. 90-107.

Updated Employment Strategy 2013–2020. <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=858> (in Bulgarian).

United Nations. (2019). World Population Ageing 2019. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf>.

Yordanova, G. (2020). Policy Trails in Bulgaria with a Focus on Employment and Empowerment. *Revista Inclusiones*, 7, pp. 398-414.

Youth Act, amended SG, № 21/13.03.2020, <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135786802> (in Bulgarian).